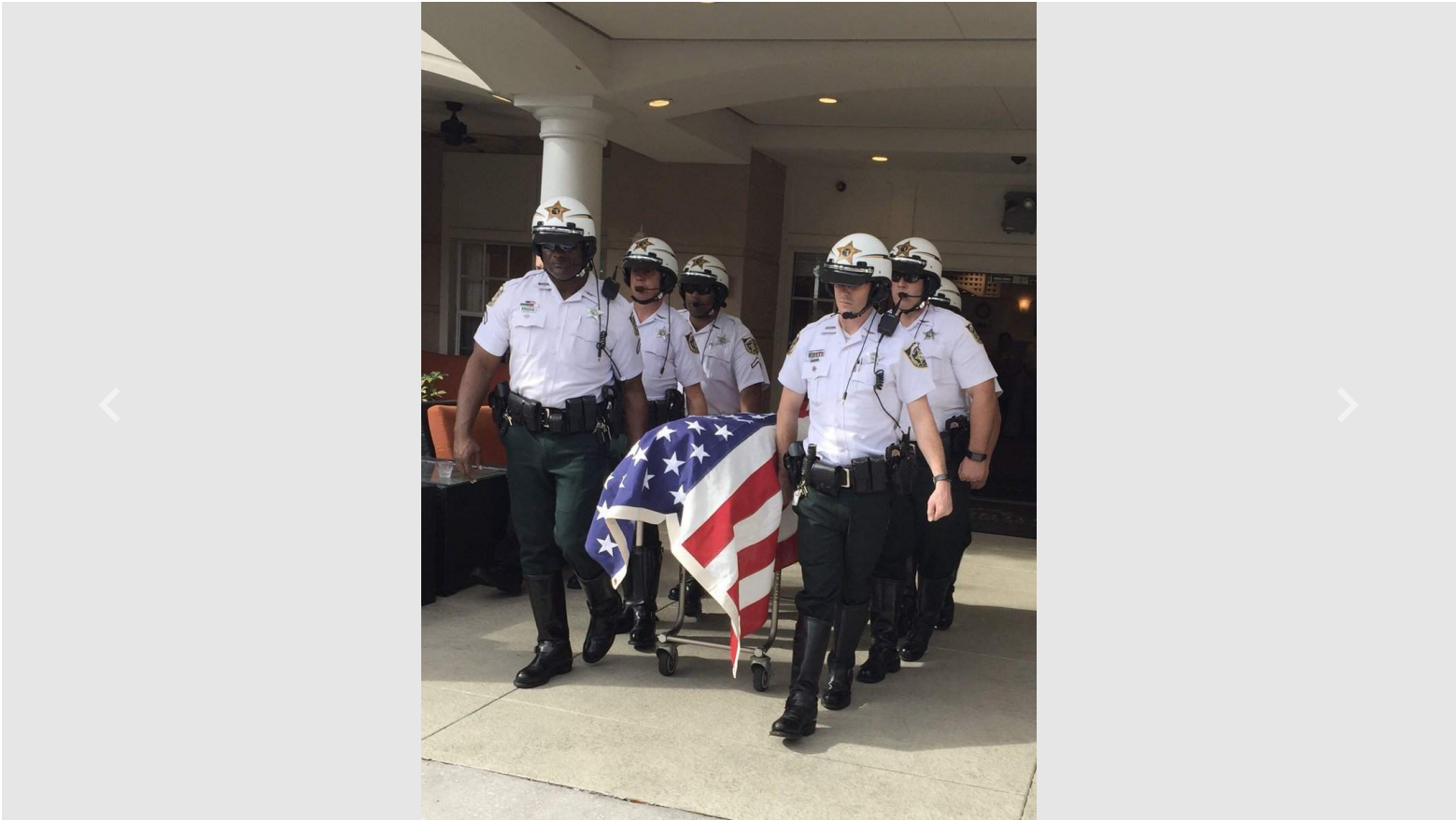


Malcolm Beard, former Hillsborough sheriff and Florida legislator, dies at 99

Mr. Beard first was elected sheriff in 1964 by beating an incumbent in a tight, bitterly contested race – the last time Hillsborough saw a truly competitive race for the office.



The Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office posted this Twitter image of the office's motor unit escorting the flag-draped casket of former sheriff, state legislator and Navy veteran Malcolm Beard, who died Wednesday. [Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office]



By **Dan Sullivan**

Published January 3
Updated January 3

TAMPA — Malcolm Beard was surprised to learn in 2013 that the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office would rename its Ybor City operations center in his honor.

"I always thought old politicians were like day-old newspapers," he said then. "They were forgotten about."

Many, though, remember Malcolm Beard.

From Tampa to Tallahassee, the former sheriff and lawmaker is universally described as tough but civil, principled yet not uncompromising. As the county's top lawman, he is credited with setting an example for successive sheriffs. And as a longtime state senator, he helped lead the first Republican-controlled legislature in more than a century.

Sheriff Beard died Thursday. He was 99, just a month shy of his 100th birthday.

"He was an individual totally committed to serving the community," said former Hillsborough State Attorney and appellate judge E. J. Salcines. "Bettering the community ... was his philosophy of life."

Mr. Beard was born in 1919 in Moultrie, Ga. and moved to Florida with his family in 1924. He attended Hillsborough High School, where he was a star linebacker, graduated in 1941 and would later attend the University of Tampa. He also served as a Navy Seabee during World War II and was stationed in the Pacific theater.

In 1946, he became a Tampa police officer. He left the department in 1953 to become an investigator for the county solicitor, and later served as a supervisor for the State Beverage Department. During the brief mayoralty of J.L. Young, Mr. Beard served for three months as Tampa's police chief. In 1957, he was elected as Hillsborough County Constable, a law enforcement position which was later eliminated from the state constitution.

Then he ran against Sheriff Ed Blackburn in 1964 — the last time Hillsborough County saw a truly competitive race for its top law enforcement job.

New sheriff won over those in power. The voters? They don’t get a say.

Mr. Beard won office by prevailing in a bitterly contested Democratic primary by 905 votes.

As sheriff, he is credited with modernizing the agency, overseeing its evolution from a rural policing entity to a metropolitan law enforcement organization, now one of the largest in the nation.

“He was John Wayne,” said Jack Espinosa, who would later serve as the agency’s spokesman. “He was very fair, but very firm.”

Espinosa said Beard was instrumental in quelling race riots in 1967, working with aides hired through federally funded neighborhood service centers to police the affected areas.

He was reelected sheriff without opposition in 1968.

In 1972, Mr. Beard carried out what was then one of the largest drug raids in Hillsborough County history, netting 38 arrests. He drew criticism for letting the news media photograph the action, as deputies roused some suspects from sleep. But six months later, voters voiced their approval and gave Beard his third victory.

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"I got more votes than Nixon that year," he said later.

Hillsborough County Supervisor of Elections Craig Latimer, who spent more than 30 years as a sheriff’s deputy, was hired by Beard in 1972. He remembered Beard as a hands-on sheriff, who often greeted deputies before and after their patrol shifts. He’d remind them to stay safe.

“He was very involved with the deputies and the entire office,” Latimer said. “You’d hear him on the radio at night. He’d go out on calls and check on the deputies.”

Politically, Mr. Beard was a conservative. But he resisted extremes. In the early 1970s, he spoke against the Ku Klux Klan. "There's no place for them in our society," he said. At the same time, he decried what he termed "ultra liberals." He quelled student anti-war protests and carried out a court injunction to end rock concerts. He said he had nothing against organized labor, but that unions "have no place in police work."

He won his last race for sheriff in 1974, then resigned from office in 1978 to run for a seat on the Florida House of Representatives. Walter Heinrich, a Democrat and Mr. Beard’s chief deputy, was his handpicked successor, who won a five-way special election. So began a tradition of Hillsborough sheriffs’ anointing their successors.

Mr. Beard served in the Florida House from 1978 to 1980, and in 1979 was elected to the state Senate. In 1985, the lifelong Democrat became a Republican.

“He came from an era when principles and integrity and courage of your convictions were an essential ingredient for public service,” said Republican Tom Lee, who succeeded Beard as state senator from east Hillsborough and is now serving another stint in that chamber. “I tried to model my own approach to public service around his value system. It wasn’t until I got to the Senate that I realized what a giant of a man he was.”

Lee recalled Mr. Beard as mostly soft-spoken, but a man whose words were memorable.

"Don't trade your old friends for new ones," Mr. Beard advised his young successor. "You're there to represent your community."

Despite his criminal justice background, Mr. Beard was outspoken in the Legislature about Florida’s transportation needs and served as chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee. His work in transportation funding and an unblemished career in which he remained independent of lobbying influences brought him recognition in 2001.

On June 20, 2001, Hillsborough County commissioners presented him with its annual Ellsworth G. Simmons Good Government Award. Along with the Moral Courage Award, the recognition is one of the top two honors commissioners hand out each year.

He gained a reputation for making, at times, candid remarks.

"We used to shoot 'em when they ran," he once quipped about criminals who flee from law enforcement.

“If they get the death penalty, then the recidivism rate is zero,” he said another time, referencing repeat rapists.

In 1993, during a chaotic session, he said the Legislature looked “worse than a circus.”

Mr. Beard was one of the Florida Senate’s longest-serving members. But in 1995 he announced that he would not seek reelection.

“Old age has caught up with me,” joked Mr. Beard, then 76. “I’d be 80 years old when I finish my next term.”

Times senior news researchers Caryn Baird and John Martin contributed to this report, which also used information compiled by former Times obituaries editor Craig Basse, who died in 2008.



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